

ONE MAN AGAINST THE MOB

Interview #13

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RITCHIE: You were saying that you've never read a good book about Washington.

ELSON: No, I guess [Allen] Drury's book [*Advise and Consent*] was probably as close as any that I've read, that has a feel for the whole power structure and the way Washington worked back then.

RITCHIE: You said there were concentric circles.

ELSON: Oh, yeah. When I first came here it just seemed to me that the socializing that took place was mainly in private parties, or at embassies and in diplomatic circles, mainly because they had the blue laws and all that here, so you couldn't move from one table to another with a drink, and everything had to be off the table at a certain hour. At midnight on Saturday things closed down. But there were these concentric circles, and they would all sort of overlap together. Sometimes you'd run into the military, or the diplomatic crowd, and then there would be the legislative crowd, and the White House crowd. Not all of them fit on top of each other, but they sort of intertwined. You'd fall into it. It was more by accident than by design, unless you deliberately started going to embassy things.

I know I used to be invited a lot of times to them. And I probably should have gone to a lot more than I did. The senator would get the invitation and he rarely went to any evening event unless it was an Arizona function or a White House function where it was sort of a command performance, or something like that. So I had lots of opportunities if I had taken advantage of them, and probably could have expanded my interests and circles if there had been the time. But between all the lobbyists and the other demands on your time, when you're working six and seven days a week, and have a young family, it just became impossible to do all the things that you wanted to do.

Of course, you could become a real alcoholic in a hell of a hurry if you went to all the social events that you are invited to in Washington.

I should have put in those circles the lobbyists. They sort of flowed through the stream too. You would find them at various functions. It's a great, confusing, wonderful, exciting city because the power's here. It certainly has been the center of the world's power, and when you're around it, it's just hypnotic almost. I found it fascinating, and I wish I had gotten to know more people, and I wish I had spent more time with the diplomatic and military crowd than I did, though they were normally coming to us, particularly the military, and also the State Department, for money. When the old man was sitting on top of the purse strings, we didn't have to go too often to them. But I sort of regret not having spent a little more time expanding my circle of interest. Who knows what might have happened?

RITCHIE: Why do you think that most of the writers don't capture the Washington that you knew?

ELSON: Well, I even see it in some of our pundits that on the talk shows, who think they're all so smart and have great insights into Washington. First of all, I think you really have to have a little experience on Capitol Hill to get the flavor of it and to understand its workings. It's hard to be just a casual observer in some remote position. I think you really have to be involved in it to get the feel of the give and take that takes place, and the nuances, because it's like sifting sand: you can never capture it, and it's always changing. So I think you need experience first of all, and then I think most writers—or pundits—have never really been in a political campaign and really been into the guts of politics, of running a campaign, or raising money, or doing all the hard stuff, and understanding the pressures from constituents, and from interest groups and lobbyists. Very rarely has one of them been a lobbyist either.

I think it's very difficult to find someone who can capture all of that. I'm not saying it can't be done, I just think that this is a very difficult place to really capture the sense of just the Senate alone as an institution, let alone taking into consideration the House. And people forget, I think, so often that you only have 535 members, or how many there are now, and they're the only elected officials you have federally except for the President of the United States, and he's the only one in the executive branch

who's elected. The Vice President goes along for a ride. People forget that these are the most responsive people in the world, and have to be if they want to stay around for a little bit or have any influence.

To me, the legislative branch has always been the fascinating one because it is so much more responsive. It is also more difficult to control, to lead, to achieve consensus. Yet in our democracy it's the only place that I now know that can really keep the executive branch honest, and of course there's always the fight between executive prerogatives and legislative prerogatives in every area you can think of. It's shifting all the time, depending on the popularity and strength of the president and his mastering of all these very same things. And then of course you do have that third branch, the judiciary, it depends on how active they are. And of course the Senate as an institution, I think is probably the greatest institution in the world, I mean that we still have in the world. It is a body that grows, and goes backward, takes one step forward, and falls on its [expletive]. Just in the time I've been here—and we're talking about thirty-eight years now—to see it change, and the ebb and flows of power, and the different changes in leadership in the House and the Senate, and the strong presidents, I still have a lot of confidence in it.

I'm not particularly enamored in the way things are going right at the moment, but I have hope for the institution itself, because it always seems to respond eventually. It may take awhile, but it seems to keep the process, the democratic system, alive. I can't overemphasize enough in my opinion the understanding that the Congress is really the place where people should pay the most attention to the type of individuals they send here, because it's the only chance they really have to make the changes that they want and be felt.

The president is limited in his control—just look at Reagan, for instance. He won on a platform of less government and cutting the budget, and you know what happened there. Government has gotten bigger and the debt is totally out of whack after eight years of his administration. But people believed all that stuff, and again it was—like we talked before about the mythology and the reality of images. Yet we're paying a hell of a price and I don't know if we'll ever recover from some of the things that went on during the '80s. But to me the place to be, and the place that American citizens should

be most concerned is in the type of people they elect to the House and the Senate, if its going to work.

RITCHIE: You commented about the pundits. How would you rate the press and the media in general in terms of the way they cover Congress?

ELSON: Shallow, for the most part. They do not give the men that are here credit for the talent that they have, and the reasons that they function the way they did. Particularly when it comes to television, it's the moment. You can't do anything in depth, even with public broadcasting, like McNeil-Lehrer, and some of those. I think they find, as the president does on many occasions, it's easy to blame Congress for the problems. They didn't react, or they didn't do this or that. Most of them don't seem to understand, for instance, the budget process at all, a president making a budget and how that whole thing works. Unfortunately, they really think that their stuff smells good, for the most part. They think that what they pontificate is the gospel, and they're able to give this insightful analysis of a situation.

I've yet to see any problem—you remember the old saying, "there's always two sides to every question"—when I first came back here I suddenly realized that there were about forty sides to every little simple question that seemed to come up. Because anything that you did here had an effect on everyone, whether it was taxes, appropriations, a special project, defense, just name it. This is why I've always loved politics, because I can't think of anything that affects everyday an individual's life in some form or fashion. Not paying attention to it, and sticking your head in the sand, why you'll soon get your [expletive] blown off. So it does bother me that people don't vote like they use to, or register and take the interest in it.

I'm sad to see the destruction of the two political parties—mainly because of the presidential races. There's no real grass roots out there anymore. It's put together for the moment. It's not really an organization. They don't have the patronage, they have no way of keeping discipline. Now it's more of a money-raising scheme through mass mailings. You get the names without faces and bloody statistics. That's, I think, really too bad. At the state level, particularly, at least it seems to me, they talk about the party. But just like that court ruling up in Illinois where they said you can't fire a person because patronage is only limited to the very highest echelons. And of course

it's true in Washington. I don't know how many Schedule-Cs there are now, but probably less than there were in the '60s, and now you have a bigger government. I've always felt a president should have the chance to get control of the government by putting in his people. I think we touched on that a little bit when we were talking about Kennedy and the way he moved right after he was elected. He did move his people in as rapidly as anyone I can remember, so to that extent he had a better control of policy than you might have expected from him.

RITCHIE: Your career spanned the age from before television in politics to the age when television dominates politics. How have the United States Senate and the senators reacted to media broadcasting?

ELSON: Well, I think we touched that earlier too. I always come back to that damn Class of '58, where you had nineteen new senators, sixteen new Democrats and three Republicans, and then I think a couple more came in in the next year as a result of special elections. Twenty or twenty-one new senators came in, that's a fifth of the Senate changed at that time. I think that was really the first television class. Of course, they had learned through their media advisors, which became popular during the late '50s although you always had PR men around or newspaper people and that sort of thing. But I think it has become a tremendous influence. I have mixed emotions today about the televising of the Senate and House. I don't know that it has added to the debate particularly. You see a lot of politicking, and grandstanding, and posturing. But these guys are good. They know how to get that sound bite and to say quickly (and look pretty) something that's rather frivolous, but it gets the news back home.

Television has tremendously changed campaigning, certainly. There is the constant pressure of keeping everything up, everyday, and getting their attention so you can get some exposure, particularly if you have other ambitions. But just being a senator you need occasionally to get some exposure for back home. I'm not saying in every case, but most of them realize that they have to utilize the media and exploit them as much as the media has been exploiting them. I really don't like it, because there's nothing in depth. The presidential debates, for instance, are a big farce. I remember going over to represent the Democratic National Committee briefly with the League of Women Voters and some others. I said, "They're not really debates. They're

little performances. And until you actually have some real debates and let the two candidates freely swing at each other, then you might find out how a man stands up." But as far as their value goes, they're too much controlled by the media, and the parties won't agree on anything. Maybe they are coming around to something they can agree on.

I saw the change when I was running Carl Hayden's campaign. Of course, he looked like a cadaver in those days. He was eighty-five and his skin was atrophying a little bit. So the way we handled his television appearances was we had him the year before, when we had been out there in the state, I had him down in Glen Canyon Dam in a chopper, wearing a hard-hat, and down at the fort inspecting the troops, and in a tank. It was a deliberate thing that we put together. We went to missile inspections, went down to Cape Canaveral, just did all those things. At the same time, we were also working, in the sense that all these were legitimate things that he wanted to see anyhow. But we had a camera crew along and got all this in the can very early. Then he never appeared live, outside of some posed shots. We made a thirty-minute documentary. When we showed it, it beat all the ratings of the networks, which sort of irritated them. I mean, it was a very well-done documentary. Someone like that, of course, is at a disadvantage on television. He might be the most brilliant guy in the world, but may be uglier than hell or too pretty. You never know what's going to be an advantage or a disadvantage, so everyone does it a little differently.

We also used a lot of radio, as I did in my campaigns. Radio, I think, is one of the most effective ways of reaching voters—I'm talking about buying commercial time, radio can do a much better job with some of those talk shows, but you find fewer and fewer of those. We had a few in Arizona where these guys were really pretty good and knew some history, and knew a little bit about government and could ask the second question, the third question. That was refreshing. But that and direct mail are very effective, and you can target it now with computers, knowing your demographics pretty well.

Today, it seems like the media—and I'm including all of them, the journalists too—anytime when you read any of the newspapers it seems like it's not like journalism was, where in the first couple of paragraphs you can get who, what, why, when, and all the essentials of the story, and then if you wanted to read on and get really detailed,

you could do that. Now, it seems like everyone has a by-line in the press, and on radio and television, and they all try to predict what's going to happen. It's not just good enough to say this is what happened. I think we touched on this in one of the other interviews, about how that's all changed. I don't know what's wrong with the words "no comment," or just a plain "no," or "I don't think right at this time you need to know, when the time comes we'll give you a report."

I personally feel that one of the bad things that happened was a lot of the Sunshine crap, because all you find anymore at a mark-up of a bill are maybe some reporters and a lobbyist. You don't find the public there, it's the lobbyists. You can hardly get in for falling over the lobbyists. You're not able to go into executive session, particularly in a mark-up, where in the art of politics it's the compromise, or the working out of these difficulties and complicated subjects, where you can have this give-and-take and make the argument, where a lot of things *were* decided in the old days. Now, all the reform has forced, in my opinion, is members to meet quietly ahead of time or in little groups, or over the phone, or in offices, to decide on what they're going to do. Then the rest is a damn show. You know, they go in there and go through the very same damn thing that you see maybe on the floor, or when they're campaigning.

And of course, the lobbyists are sitting there. I remember sitting there. You respected the man and hoped that if say the amendment that you had asked him to propose or he had agreed to offer, if that didn't work that he had enough judgment to either make a compromise that wasn't going to hurt you, or would work out something that might not be as good as you wanted, but at least he would work it out. But so many times a member ends up looking at one of the lobbyists sitting there and he's afraid to do him a service because they'll end up telling him, "this is the bottomline, we can't go beyond this," and all that. So he let's it go, or loses. In an executive session you could work out those things, because you knew where the amendments were coming from, and there are not too many surprises around here—at least I've never found too many when it gets into a mark-up. So I don't think it was abused, quite frankly. A lot of the reporters, again, they wanted it because they had to take what the committee chairman, or subcommittee chairman, or members would tell them when they came out of the meeting. Of course, you filed a report, it was all there, the language was there, but they're lazy, a lot of them. I'll bet you half of these reporters

don't read the damn report or the legislation. They take whatever they say it is. There are very few of them that really read that much, in my opinion.

As an example, I remember when all hell was being raised, I guess this was back in the '50s, when the salaries were always secret, members' office salaries. They knew the total amount, and what the top was to be paid, and that sort of thing. But the individual salaries were secret. The press was saying "the public has a right to know," and all the other things. Well, all it did was once every six months they'll print the salaries of the senators' staff in the home paper. What it did cause was a lot of discontent among fellow employees on the Hill because they'd compare themselves against someone in someone else's office or on a committee and what they were getting, and so the pressure was on the member to bring them all up to snuff or work out something else, which caused some changes in the whole way salaries are handled up here now.

They got that, but outside of the overall thing about salaries for members, my God, on the pay issue as far as staffs are concerned they only do that every six months. The Secretary has to fill out that six-month report. I guess they still do it, a big old green volume with all the salaries—which is useful information if you want to go through and dig it out, fine. I guess I had no real objection to the listing of salaries, because ours were, I think, handled pretty fairly and equitably. But I know it did cause a lot of problems among other staffs, because they'd say, "Gee, I know I've been here longer and I should be getting more." And of course, it was up to each member of the Senate and the House to determine their individual salaries. Now we're going to civil rights and job security and all these other things.

What I loved about the Senate was the pressure of knowing that if you screwed up you got your [expletive] canned that day. The member had the right, because it was his tail that was on the line, not yours. I sort of liked it that way. When I was hiring people, and I hired a lot of people for Carl Hayden over the years, what I tried to look for—and wasn't always successful of course—was loyalty to the senator. They didn't have to agree with everything that he said, but if they had a disagreement at least keep it in-house; and a willingness to keep your mouth shut. I mean there's a lot of loose talk about things that they didn't either have all the information and may have seen part of it but not all of it, or understand it. It was pretty hard to find that. Of course, you'd

figure that after ninety days or whatever you'd find out how good they were, how bright they were. But if they screwed up, you had a right to get rid of them.

Now, that's an exaggeration that we'd do it in one day. Most of the time, anyone we fired we gave them a good severance and helped them maybe get located somewhere else. But on occasion I've just out and out fired people, mainly for lying, saying they did something they didn't do, or they were supposed to be someplace. A couple of people that way. I personally liked the pressure of knowing that. It just kept you alert, knowing that you had to exercise a lot of judgment. I don't think it makes you less aggressive, because you're being cautious. I just think it makes you look for those forty different sides. The secret is so that you'll never be blindsided on anything, that you know you've anticipated where pressures are coming from, or where the arguments are coming from, or who might be for or against you on certain legislative matters or political issues.

As I said, I just loved working under that sort of pressure, and I don't think in the whole time that I worked for Carl Hayden, outside of the two times that I mentioned to you about how he told me about how I thought his thoughts, that he really ever complimented me on anything. He just expected you to do good work. He'd let you know if he didn't particularly like it, but he sort of expected the best out of everyone. He didn't mind our playing, you know I think our office had a reputation for working hard but also playing very hard. And he loved to surround himself with young people—I think it kept him young and stimulated him. Though he had probably heard every argument we ever made, all of us combined, at one point or another in his career, he just liked being reminded, and having the stimulus of people argue with him, or come out with some of these things. Where the hell were we? [laughs]

RITCHIE: We've been talking about the staff in the '50s and the '60s. Now that you've come back in the '90s, what does the Senate staff look like to you today, by comparison?

ELSON: Well, I don't like what I've seen since I've been back these fourteen months or so. Number one, I can't believe how these staffs have grown. I think they've either tripled or quadrupled since I left here on January the 2nd or 3rd of 1969. I saw it of course when I was a lobbyist. Now there seems to be a lot of layers in

between people and the member. I don't know that the members are being better served particularly by the larger staffs. I know there's been a tremendous increase in constituent mail and all that, and they've all seemed to have gone back to opening all these home offices all over their states. We did all of that out of Washington in our day. In the last couple of years we did open two offices, one in Phoenix and one in Tucson, but most of the stuff we'd still have them come back. They were more or less "ears," and people would go in and complain to them. But we'd still do all the stuff mainly out of Washington.

Number one is the tremendous increase; then, I don't know, I've become very fond of the computer personally, but I don't know that in this age of communication that people are really communicating. I don't see them talking among themselves. They're all hidden behind these damn pieces of equipment. There seems to be a lot of make-work, too. For instance, I always thought that certain committees ought to have the support elements, like our budget thing, what do they call that office?

RITCHIE: The Disbursing Office?

ELSON: No, no, no. The budget. . . .

RITCHIE: Oh, the Congressional Budget Office.

ELSON: Yeah, things like that, and the Office of Technological Assessment, those sort of things I thought were wonderful innovations, or improvements, because you needed some of the technical, non-partisan expertise that you could rely on, not rely necessarily on the executive branch, or on industry, for information, that you could have access to some impartial people to analyze it, who weren't promoting it. I've found, which I'm sure has always been true, but it seems to me that there's more of it today than there was then, that the executive branch doesn't always tell you the truth. They're not always coming forth as they should in giving the type of information that rightfully should be available to members of Congress, and to the committees.

This, incidentally, is where I think Carl Hayden was really a master, because you didn't dare come before his committee and lie. That son of a gun could get right to the heart of a complicated problem. You might think he was sitting there asleep or

something like that, and then he'd come back. I don't know how many times I've seen it, but he'd come with these penetrating questions and practically knock the guy off the witness stand with the question.

But I don't know about this tremendous increase in the personal staff and committee staff, like having a member entitled to a staff man on every damn committee he serves on. That's what a professional staff is supposedly for on a committee. In those days, when I was up here, the professional staff was pretty damn professional, though they all got their by politics, but they served the members for the most part very impartially. As I say, it seems like the members are being more and more isolated from the public and the lobbyists. I know when I was lobbying for those ten years and had my own consulting business, again recognizing the importance of staff, I always concentrated on good staff relationships. And yet, it was really hard to keep up because there were so many changes. They don't seem to stay as long.

That's the other thing that I think is different. There was more real interest in public service when you came as a staff member to Capitol Hill and worked here than it seems to me now. Again, this has just been my observation since I got back, it seems to me it's become more a thing to put on your resume, looking for something bigger and better. And there seems to be too much specialization. You have an expert on this, an expert on that. I was spoiled—that's the wrong word I guess—but the way Carl Hayden trained every man in his office was that you learned to do everything, and so you really weren't a specialist, you were a generalist. You were supposed to apply good judgment to everything. He felt, and I feel, that in our government, in this city, there is someone who is an expert who knows a hell of a lot more than you do, and you can draw on that resource. It's up to you to know how to get to that resource, bring it out, apply it to your problem, and bring them together. To me, that's the real art of the politician, and that's why he is a politician, to bring the expertise of others together and apply it to a social or political problem.

I was exposed to everything, and that's what made it so exciting. One thing I can I say about myself: I wasn't afraid to make decisions. I thought I knew the senator's position pretty well on most things, and I thought I had good judgment in making decisions, and I'd make them. I wouldn't waste a lot of time. But I would

always try to get as much information as possible. At least I was always willing to make the decision and take the heat for it if it was the wrong decision.

But now it seems to me there's a real age of specialization. The left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing all the time. The leadership, for instance, has to try to bring that together when everyone has this little cubbyhole niche they're in, and bring them out. And too much legislation, for instance, I think is being written on the floor. Before, when they'd come out of committee, you'd pretty much go along with the committee chairman and ranking member, because they had really carefully looked over the subject that was in the area of their jurisdiction. And as you pointed out in one of our early interviews, when you look at the Appropriations Committee, you had all the chairmen of all the other committees on there in the first place, so they were always talking, they had this really close arrangement. Now, you don't find that to be the case. An awful lot, it seems to me, of legislation is being written on the floor, mammoth paperwork.

I like some of the changes that have taken place, as I said, in the support area. For instance, your office and what the Secretary's office has been doing in this area, I've always felt that there should have been something along that line. You're talking really about peanuts when it comes to the budget up here, but some of those things I've really felt were very, very good.

I know I've heard Barry Goldwater and a lot of others saying "you ought to cut the staffs in half," I don't know whether I'd go that far. So, those are some of the changes. The other thing that I seem to note, and I think it's again because there isn't the closeness, because it's gotten so big, is this camaraderie that is sort of necessary to make the system work. It's really sad, because we're missing a lot, and I think it's essential. But people don't seem to trust each other anymore. To me, the only thing you have in politics is your word. If you made a commitment, your word is your bond. If you violate that, you don't have anything. It seems to me that people are lying to each other up here, staffs, and they're holding people like it was all their own, like it was some big secret that you couldn't get if you really worked at it or something like that. I've even noticed members lying to each other, and that's pretty damn bad. There's a lot of—well, I don't know whether I want to call it partisanship, but the great thing about the Senate, because I always believed in unlimited debate, I'm always very

fearful that its too easy to get a majority, that's the simplest thing in the world. And now sixty percent is awfully easy to get. And yet, under some of the rule changes, I think they've abused the thing from the time of the old days.

Maybe members are socializing more than staff people, but there's no place for instance like the Carroll Arms anymore. You've got the Monocle over there and some other places, but there's no one place you could fall out of the building and just go there, like the Plaza. And then you have the other change that I see, the proliferation of lobbyists. Jesus Christ there must be just in the last twenty years, you look at the lobbying lists, that book on trade associations, it gets bigger and bigger. More and more companies and organizations are now located here in Washington, when they used to be spread out between here, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the headquarters of all these organizations. Now they all seem to have offices here, so you stumble over this horde of individuals. That's made a significant difference. For the most part they're single-issue type organizations. Too often, I think that really screws up the whole political process. So those are some of the changes that I've seen. I guess I'm sounding as though I haven't liked many of them. [laughs]

RITCHIE: I wanted to ask one other question about the media as a factor in this. You talked about the shallowness of the media, but when you were in Washington and functioning in the Senate for all that period of time, were there any particular reporters that you had more confidence in than others? People you would turn to regularly to read or to provide information to?

ELSON: Well, some of them were local. Of course, you've got to remember about Carl Hayden, he never had a press secretary until I hired one in 1961 or 62, and that didn't work. Then we had one after that. We didn't cater to the press very much, though it came in. Roger Mudd we had a high opinion of. I thought he was very good. And Bill Small, who was covering the Hill, was very good back in those days. I'm trying to think of some of the others. The senator knew all the big reporters. He knew [Drew] Pearson, he knew [Walter] Lippmann, he knew all those people. But it always amazed me that so little came out after they talked to him, or he talked to them. It wasn't that he wouldn't discuss a subject, it was just that he wasn't giving them the type of things that they wanted, that would sell newspapers, or get commercials, or help the ratings.

We kept very close touch with the local press at home. The *Arizona Republic* had an office here, but the others didn't. What the senator would do was send them the *Congressional Record*, and a *Directory*, through the year, and then in return they'd send him the newspaper. Then when we went around the state, we stopped in at every newspaper publisher, all the television stations. I did talk him into doing local interviews with both radio and television. He was always very good at it, because he was wonderful off-the-cuff, and always had this wry sense of humor that caught them off guard. He had that little twinkle in his eye, and always a surprise answer. They weren't quite expecting some of his candidness. He was very natural at it, and very good. I think he would have been wonderful in today's world, as he was when he was a young man, or even when I first went with him. He was so natural and honest, it just came through. You couldn't help but respect the man for that, and it showed very much.

RITCHIE: You cited Roger Mudd, what was it about Mudd that appealed to you?

ELSON: First of all, he really was a good observer and he seemed to do his homework. He did a lot of background digging. I don't know Roger's background that much, and I never had that many dealings with him. But every time we did, or saw his coverage of something, he at least knew the issue. He sort of had a respect for the Congress and the institution, it wasn't: they're all bad guys; and they're dumb; who sent them back here? He seemed to have a great respect for the institution of the Congress, and for that matter the White House too. But he really seemed to work at it. And he wasn't—at least I never found him to be—so pushy.

I know it used to bother Carl Hayden when we had someone testifying, like a Kennedy or someone like that, before one of his subcommittees, or something was going on of major import, where the cameras would come in. It used to make him so mad because as soon as that person had finished testifying and they'd gotten what they wanted, they'd start breaking down the cameras. He almost had the Rules Committee propose a rule that once television covered a hearing they had to wait until the hearing either recessed or were excused before they could start moving out their equipment. Because the television crews were awful, and still are, lots of them. They'd just up and move their cameras, and break down all the wires. You'd think that was the only

important issue. That's where you got frustrated, because they'd be covering some popularity contest rather than what was really the substance of matters taking place.

But because of that twenty-four hundred miles between here and Arizona, we were fortunate in some ways that they weren't that close, that we could get away without paying too much attention to them. So many times, the senator would just say, "no comment." It could be on some of the biggest matters in the world. Then the question would come, "Well, isn't it true what so and so said." He would say, "Well, maybe he did, I don't know, you'd better go ask him." And he was able to get away with that. I don't know whether he could do very much of that today, because there's sort of this symbiotic relationship between the press and the politicians. They're almost becoming one and the same [laughs], because they're using each other. The cost of modern-day politics has made getting those little sound-bites on the evening news very, very valuable. If you had to pay for those, they'd cost a fortune. So they're all jockeying for that position.

RITCHIE: Earlier, you cited Allen Drury's novel very highly. Did you think that really captured the Senate of the '50s when you were here?

ELSON: Well, it was a composite of a lot of people. I thought I could identify certain characters, and of course we did have the suicide and all the other things up here. At the time, I felt he had come fairly close to capturing the institution. You know, you've got to remember that all these guys are human beings.

That's the other thing I should probably say. You asked me what the difference is today. I think that privacy is not quite as private as it was back then. Today, Jesus, I don't think I could even run for office with the type of scrutiny that they put you through, and all the little personality quirks that you might have, or not have, or the things you've done. For instance, I can't think of very few people that grew up in the '60s, or went to college then, who probably hadn't tried some marijuana at one time or another. Of course, in today's world that would disqualify you if you even admitted that you might have tried it, in a controlled situation. Though there's always been womanizing going on around here, I don't think it was any more discrete back then, it was just that the press didn't pay that much attention to it. It was probably more of a male bastion of macho stuff then, so that was probably a plus in many ways than

today. We had gay members then and staff, but I see a great increase in that area. Not that there is anything wrong with that, or their ability to get the job done, but again the media makes things out of that, so that's different.

I remember looking over one of the forms that one of these people for nominations that need Senate confirmation have to fill out, and my God, who would want one? [laughs] Every little. . . well, they want to get into your bedroom, they want to get into every possible thing. I don't know anyone that can really, if you've done anything at all, or you've been active, cannot have some vulnerability somewhere along the line.

I was told, and I sort of felt, that one of my strengths in being Carl Hayden's AA was I always had a sense for where someone was vulnerable. I sort of knew how I could play it, too, at some point along the line. Not necessarily in a cruel way, but with the right timing you could take advantage of that particular weakness, or whatever the vulnerability was. But in today's world, around here, my God, they're asking an awful lot of human beings with all their make up to adhere to some ethical standards that I think are absurd.

I sure wouldn't want to be sitting on the Ethics Committee in today's world, with everything that's going on, and the way the media has tried to make certain things that you probably wouldn't have considered questionable twenty years ago, they've turned it into a big question. I guess I could think of a lot of other changes, but I don't want to sound like—I find it difficult sometimes when I listen to myself talking to others, I don't want to dwell on the past so much, because this is a rapidly changing world. It was then, but it has the appearances of moving faster now, and perhaps more complicated, but I'm not so sure that's true. I don't want to sound like I'm putting down the Congress or the Senate, or the institutions of government particularly, I'm just disappointed because my level of expectation has always been higher than the performance. Where you get really cynical, I guess, is when there's a big gap between the expectation and performance. If there's enough of that, people end up doing themselves in. [laughs]

RITCHIE: Last year, the Senate turned down the nomination of John Tower, a long-time member of the Senate, to be Secretary of Defense, and they debated his

drinking and his sex life and all the rest of it. Some of the newspapers wrote that the day of the Senate club was over, and this symbolized it. Is that a fair assessment?

ELSON: I don't think so. No, I think it depends on the members. I see a time when a "club," like we refer to "the club," could be around again. It's not one that's going to disappear. It may not be as strong as it once was, but you still have a core of people that are really movers and doers.

I think Tower brought so much of that on himself, because he was open and notorious, and just sort of rubbed it in everyone's nose. You notice this about little people, they all think their stuff really smells good. I remember when he first came here. Over where the chairman, meaning Hayden, had his hideaway, right across from it there was a door that was about three feet high, and it was arched and everything else. I don't know what was back there, but we used to say, "This is Tower's hideaway." Anyone who's been around here—I personally saw him in a condition, well, I mean intoxicated, and with different women at the Carroll Arms and at the Monocle. He had sort of a special table there. I'm not so sure it's all right to be open and notorious, but he was just flagrant. I don't think they would have turned on him had he been a nicer person. I mean, he double-dealt a lot, in my opinion. I could see why this could then become an issue. Because there's a lot of members around, and others, who play games and have extramarital affairs, and drink a lot, and play a lot. But it's not so blatant that it becomes an issue. And it's not a continuous activity.

There's something about power. I know in my own case, when you're around lots of power, it attracts these extremes, the brightest and the best and then it really attracts some of the worst human beings in the world. Women have always been fascinated with and attracted to the power thing. There's a certain group that either gets a vicarious thrill or identifies with that power. So as a man, I always said it was almost impossible to stay out of trouble on Capitol Hill, because there were *so many* attractive ladies, and they thought you were sort of interesting. And even if you were married and did everything, you had to have almost a Christ-like character to avoid an indiscretion at some point along the line. And there was always the danger when you're around power too, you start believing some of the things that people say about you, and it goes to your head. When you see things get done, and happen, and how you can use power, and that it really works, all of a sudden, my God, I can do lots of things!

I remember—I'm digressing again, this is almost the way we started these interviews—I remember that after a while there was period of time when I was so used to making decisions, could make them, and on certain matters, just to get the same thrill of getting the job done, I would either wait till the last minute to do it, to see if I could pull it off, or somehow deliberately complicate it with something to see how I could get it done, if I could really work it out under the time-frame of these situations. That I realize was not very good, but I did it mainly because of the excitement. I loved making decisions and seeing if it would work out. But I caught myself up short when I realized that I was really playing some games with everyone there by delaying or doing things in the normal course of affairs that would run real smoothly, and I had to go out of my way to complicate it so I could get the same thrill of using power. So its a corrupting influence.

RITCHIE: Hedrick Smith has a book called *The Power Game*.

ELSON: Yeah, I'm into that, but I haven't read it all.

RITCHIE: Did you think that there were many games players that you dealt with in Washington?

ELSON: What do you mean?

RITCHIE: People who enjoyed the thrill of the game the way you've described it.

ELSON: Oh, yeah! I think both members and staff did. Oh, gee, what comes to mind, I think Russell Long was one of the best. And Bob Kerr. They were two of the best game players, who just loved everything about it, putting together things and playing it. And then there were some staff people that I knew who got the same thrill, same sensation, and played, and looked at it as a game. Though I did do some playing, I always thought of myself—I still think I am—as pretty idealistic in many ways, although a lot of people would certainly disagree with that. I always felt that there was more to it, and it meant more than just a game of politics, getting elected, or getting your man elected and everything else. That you're really there as a public servant, and that was the highest calling you could have. I think a lot of that comes because of the

type of family that I came out of, my brothers and sisters and my parents, and my education, the professors that influenced me the most were always those who believed in this higher calling rather than just going out and playing the game or making money or whatever. I played some games, maybe a lot of them, but I didn't view myself just as a games player. I guess a lot of this is in the eye of the beholder, but I still feel that there can be no greater reward and more fun and more excitement than being an elected official. My one regret in life is failing in obtaining an elected office, particularly the United States Senate, because that's something I really, really wanted. It still hurts.

RITCHIE: There's one other sort of exciting period of your life that we haven't talked about, and that's the period that's covered by James Bamford's article about your experiences with the mob in the 1980s. How did you ever get involved with a loan shark, and the events that transacted after that?

ELSON: The government asked me that question repeatedly. [laughs] When I left the broadcasting industry, I was bored and really burned out. I started back in a little consulting business, and as I said I had enough clients. I wasn't doing it to make a lot of money, but this situation developed that I was introduced to through this lady friend of mine, and I watched it operate, and I think my motivation for getting involved, and even getting others to get involved, or at least opening the door of opportunity to them, was that being burned out what I really wanted to do was put together enough money to take a sabbatical.

What I really wanted to do was get away for eighteen months to two years and try to write a book about Carl Hayden. Because I knew I wasn't enjoying lobbying any more, and I just didn't have any drive to get into real estate or some business or something like that. There was nothing that was exciting me, and then this sort of fell into my lap. And I saw an opportunity to put together a lot of cash in a hurry. What I wanted to do was have enough to get a van, get a computer, just take off, store all my stuff, and just go and see what I could do. Just travel and try doing something about Carl Hayden. Also, I wanted to have enough in reserve so that if I wanted to come back to Washington, open an office and start again, maybe after this recharging had taken place, that I could do it. A lot of people don't believe that, and I'm not so sure

that the government always believed that. I think they do, because I ended up being a hero for them.

But I got involved, and I got conned. I thought of all people, though I'd been probably conned before up here on the Hill in politics, I guess I wasn't particularly street-wise. The guy looked like a hood, but after he once started talking, man he had everyone believing him, from a former president of a bank to a former assistant secretary of the Interior, and a bunch of attorneys. I wasn't the only one that was taken in. When I introduced him to some of these people I just said, "If you're interested, here's this," and then let him talk to them. I made no pitches. But as it turned out, the way the thing operated I ended up being almost a part of the thing because I ended up being the one that sent the money, received the money, and all of a sudden it was cutting into my time from my lobbying jobs.

The only thing that saved my [expletive] during that whole thing was that I kept meticulous notes and logs. Because it was cash, and because it was all verbal, always in the back of my mind I thought, "If this thing falls apart, everyone's going to be looking to me." That's when I started taping this guy, Danny Mondavano, originally because I didn't understand the lingo in the deals, in what he was talking about. He would explain them, and I wanted to make sure that I had a record, so secretly I started taping those conversations. Because they weren't always the same people, they weren't always the same rate of interest return on the money, and it started getting complicated. So more to protect myself, it started out innocently. I just kept doing it, just to make sure that I had a record somewhere if push came to shove.

Well, of course when it turned out to be a scam, and the house of cards folded—I've been starting a collection of books and articles on con games and scams and everything else, and got some good ones. They go on every day, but it makes you feel like a total idiot when you think at least you're a little brighter than that, to be taken in. But then I think greed also came into the picture. I saw all this easy money that was coming in, and I was collecting a certain percentage on everything that everyone else had put in. So my stuff was running up pretty fast, and I could see this pot at the end of the rainbow where I was going to be able after a certain amount of time be able to do the very things that I had wanted to do. I had never been very good at saving

money, or looking for a rainy day. It was just easy come, easy go; spend it today, don't worry about tomorrow.

When I look back on it now, I'm certainly much more relaxed now than I was back then, but it really became a nightmare. And then the embarrassment of it all. First of all losing everything. Before I was totally convinced that it was gone, I used some of my money to pay off these investors their interest, thinking that he was going to get everything straight and everything would be back to normal. I lost not everything that I had, but even some stuff that I had borrowed. Then I went looking for him, and we had several sessions and meetings. He was always going to work it. From the time it started really getting bad, I started taping everyone, not only him and his group, but anyone that was involved in it. Because I thought, "If I'm going to go down the tubes, someone might be interested in this history."

Then when I made that fatal decision to go to Palm Springs to try to get the head of one of the families to collect the money for me, that was a fateful decision. I knew what I was doing in the sense that I knew when I went there that I was crossing the line into some behavior that was if not illegal certainly questionable, because I was asking them in effect to extort money from someone for me, although it was our money. Those nights and days, of course I was armed all this time. I started packing a gun and learned to sleep with it. In fact, I still miss it today, not having a .38 between the cheeks of my butt. Feeling that cold steel was always very comforting.

I learned one other thing—you know I got knocked around once, some people came breaking into this house once, looking for me, and I got threats—I found out I was probably very capable of killing. I think I learned that I could do that without a great deal of remorse, considering the type of people I was dealing with. But I was also frightened. The pressures that were going on at the time, I got very little sleep. I spent I don't know how many weeks out in California running these people down. I'd wire myself, and I did all this on my own. There was no government help in anything that I had done. Then he disappeared and I couldn't find him. That's when I went to the other mob figures. And they were charming in many ways. We used to sit around. I don't know who was BSing the most, them or me. We would tell war stories.

There was one who was really interesting. He must have spent half his life in most of the major prisons in the country, talking about being up in Ithaca with [Willie] Sutton, the bank robber, and how they used to cook their Italian food and make their little stoves, and the rumbles that they'd do, and the people that they'd kill. You know, it was delightful Damon Runyan-type stuff. I wish in those cases, when we were having these conversations, I wasn't always wired, and I would love to have had it on tape. In fact, I suggested to one of them I'd like to sit down with him with my tape recorder [laughs]—little did he know!—and get all these stories, because some of them were really fascinating, and I think probably some of them accurate. I'm sure a lot of them were exaggerated too.

But I also found out about underworld figures, the Mafia in particular. Well, this stretched all the way from a patriarchal group up in Boston and went through the Giancana crowd out in Chicago. I learned all this stuff as I went along, but there were various influences coming to bear because of this individual in the family out on the West Coast. And then of course I'd known a lot about some of them through my brother and being exposed to Nevada and Las Vegas and things like that. You found out that politicians certainly had a lot more honor than they do, because everything is money, that's all that matters. The bottomline is you have it or you don't have it. If you don't, you might get your knee broken. And you found out, that like anything else, am I really mean enough and tough enough to do what I'm capable of doing? The others are chicken. But when push comes to shove, there were some that I would not want to meet in an alley alone, and the others I would just as soon meet them because I know that they would back down before I would. As I said, some of them were pretty charming, but the language itself, it was almost like being in the oil fields when I was roughnecking, every third word was a cuss word, or talking about women. Their language almost needed a separate dictionary to sometimes understand, talking to some of them.

I felt like two people. I couldn't believe I had gotten myself in this mess. Then I'd see this other person and I couldn't believe that I was doing it, because I became a hell of a lot braver than I thought I ever would be. I was doing things that I never thought I'd do, and alone. On the one hand I'd be looking at this one guy, and then looking back at the one that I wanted to admire or have some respect for, and then I saw this other character who was turning into being just like one of them, trying to use

some of the same tactics and playing some of the same games, and trying to understand how I could compete and take them on. I had to be out of my gourd to think that singlehandedly I could take on all these people. Someone should have taken me aside and given me a good shake and said, "Who in the hell do you think you are? You're not Superman or Batman or any of those."

But I kept some logs and diaries through all that, and as I was traveling around I would talk into the tape recorder, because I didn't want to forget anything. On the one hand I felt a great deal of terror, and on the other hand I said, "You're really exaggerating. This is a gang that can't shoot straight in the first place." Sort of underestimating them, and yet when the government finally found me—and of course I'll never forget that, because I thought, "Oh, God, I'm in deep trouble now." I knew it was a race to see if I could get the money back before the Feds caught up with all these guys. I just knew it was a race against time.

I couldn't even borrow money to make any more moves, but when the Feds found me it was the Organized Crime Strike Force in LA. When I heard that call on my answering machine, I thought, "Well, it's all over now. No one's going to quite understand this situation." I remember when I finally called them back after three or four days, I kept avoiding them, and finally I talked to this one attorney. I admitted I was the person, and he said, "Well, we'd like to talk to you." He said, "We'd like to fly you out here, it won't take long." I said, "I just can't, it's a busy time." He said, "Well, you've got a choice. You can either fly out on your own or we can send the U.S. Marshals for you." But he also said, "When you do come, make sure you bring all your records." He said, "You can fly out one morning and we'll meet with you an hour or two, and you can go back that night." I said, "I don't think you realize what I might have." Then that started another nightmare.

I don't know whether I should go into it, because Bamford has another article coming out—not just an article but a book coming out about another individual who was a client of mine. This is not very much known around Washington, but at the same time this was going on I had a client who turned out to be an international con man and spy and everything else, who I represented while I was trying to stay alive, again by accident through my son who thought he was helping me. I had talked to this guy by the name of Ernie Kaiser. Anyhow, he turned out to have been everything.

Fascinating character. He made some of the other hoods look like child's play. He spoke about seven languages, and he was a charmer. The coolest cat I'd ever met. He had himself shot out here at Charlie's, just to avoid appearing before a judge. You know, Charlie's is where all the spies hang out, out there in McLean. Anyhow, this was also going on at the same time I was going before a Grand Jury. If you've never been before a Grand Jury, that's a hell of an experience, particularly without benefit of an attorney.

I decided to just hope for the best and give them every bit. When I went out on that first trip and opened that suitcase, I'll never forget the eyes on this one agent, whom I'm still in touch with, and this lawyer. Here on one side it was just filled with ninety-minute cassette tapes, and on the other side were records. I didn't take out all my records, I only took out the individual ones. They looked at that, and boy you talk about being hustled back to the federal building in a hurry, and under guard. They said, "Well, just give us an example of what's on these tapes." I pulled out one and they put it on and played it. I thought they were all going to have orgasms, the whole crowd. [laughs] They said, "Oh, this is wonderful!" And of course, it was all admissible because I had done it, it wasn't done by the government—though I had done most of it in California, which was against the state law. But that didn't bother me at the time, and I could care less. So instead of being there for a couple of hours I was there for that whole week before they let me come back. And then that started the whole business.

Then it turns out that the government was tapping some of the same conversations that I was taping. So they fit in lovely together. But one part of the Strike Force didn't know the other part of the Strike Force was working on this case until later. They discovered it, and my God! Anyhow, after I finally went to see them, and I kept appearing on these tapes that they had about collecting this money for some guy named Elson, when they were tapping these other family members. Then they realized they had already found me and I was already out there. [laughs]

There was a period of time from the time that started until just the year before last when they all went to jail, this other situation involving this Ernie Kaiser, which is in some ways more fascinating than the Mafia thing. I was involved in three trials as a key government witness down in Tampa. Ernie Kaiser, I know where he is, he's

in Germany. They're still trying to extradite him, and that's another long story, but that was going on at the same time. And not only that but the IRS had been auditing me for about—oh, it went on and on, for about seven years of business, three years of personal. Then my sister died during this period and my other brother and I were going between here and Toledo, Ohio, to take care of her. It was just a nightmare. Just a godawful nightmare. When I look back on it, I don't know really how I survived. That's probably why I shake so much. And actually to come out of it as well as I did, because once I knew I made the mistake that I made, I certainly did what I think was the right thing, so far as the government was concerned, and was willing to take my knocks if it came to that.

I guess I've always been one who sort of likes to go close to the edge. At the same time this was all going on, I must admit that I was fascinated by it all. I was excited about it all. And somehow in the back of my mind I thought I would get the [expletive]. I still want to get Ernie Kaiser, but I haven't been able to do that yet. Neither has the government. It was again this vacillation between the terror and feeling like a stupid [expletive], and then feeling also the excitement of the chase, of the hunt, of the matching of wits, and all the other stuff. In some ways I felt like a James Bond, you know that type of character, except I didn't have all the equipment. And I was amazed what one person can do, if you really stick to your guns and are not totally afraid. I must admit on a lot of occasions I was very, very much afraid. But when I look back at it, I say, "[expletive], that was exciting."

RITCHIE: It sounds a lot like an Elmore Leonard novel.

ELSON: Yeah! [laughs]

RITCHIE: There was a period there when your life was in a danger by the mob and you decided not to use government protection but to go hide out on your own. Why did you do that?

ELSON: Well, first of all, I was a little familiar with the U.S. marshals and quite frankly it sort of depends on who you're dealing with there, whether you can work out a good situation. I felt also to lose one's identity that way and start a new one, I sure and hell didn't want to do that. But mainly I didn't really trust them, that

they could protect me the way I wanted to be protected, and that would be like going to jail, having to live that way. So, thanks to this friend of mine, who also worked for the senator, who I'd hired way back, I was staying with him, I decided to take off. I don't know whether I mentioned that I was hiding up in the Picacho Peak Mountains, until he brought in a criminal lawyer, who was familiar with mob activities and had been in the Justice Department back here during the Kennedy days. He brought in a former Secret Service and former FBI man who specialized in the security of executives and things like that. We met for three days and I guess I had gotten a threat by then. When they finally got to town—he flew them in—I forget how much it must have cost him to fly these guys in and pay the attorney. We must have met for two days. It bothered me because supposedly the former FBI and Secret Service guy claimed that he had done some checking and the odds of my making it to the trial were somewhere between sixty-five and eighty-five percent *against* making it to the trial. Well, that didn't sound like very good odds to me! [laughs]

The attorney supported what he was saying, and they were recommending a plan to send me to South America, where until the trials came up I'd be under security, and if I needed a woman they'd bring one in, you know, that sort of thing. But I said, "That sounds to me like being in prison—except for the women!" I guess I could get booze and everything else, and the cost was something—they estimated the length of time I'd be in this situation was eighteen months—it was going to cost somewhere between a hundred and a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars. Now, my friend was willing to pay that, and I thought, I'm not worth that.

But those meetings ended on a Friday, and I was staying at his place, and I think it was on a Saturday morning that the two of us met, and he said, "Let's make a decision." I went over everything and told him, and I said, "I think I'll just go back to Washington and take my chances, and wait." Actually, he said, "Roy, you've always wanted to take off and go, why don't you? It would be a hell of a lot cheaper for me to pick up a little vehicle for you and you just take off." After we went over that, sure enough, within two days, three at most, he bought the vehicle. In the meantime, we had a couple of funny things happen, like an unordered pizza being delivered to his home. And he wanted me the hell out of his place in a hurry [laughs], for which I don't blame him.

So I took off and started wandering. I turned down the Witness Protection Program, but I had some good advice before I hit the road. The FBI gave me some very excellent advice, a couple of agents and one in particular in California. Then when I came back here, when I passed through here later, I met for two days with a terrorist expert from the CIA, so I got a lot of good advice on what precautions to take. Of course, I eliminated all traces, there was no way that anyone could reach me, or through my family, they didn't know where I was. So I had some excellent advice on how to disappear, and I found out you could. The vehicle that I had could not be traced to me in any way. It was through some funny corporation.

I went armed. That always bothered me, because unless they deputize you or something like that, local jurisdictions control gun control, so if you ever got stopped. . . . But I had a .30.30 with me, and a 12 gauge shotgun with pistol grip on it, a machete, mace, a Browning 9 millimeter, a thirteen-shot semi-automatic, which I could shoot pretty good, and then this .38 snubnose revolver I carried with me all the time. All were loaded with "special" ammunition. So when I'd stop at night, I'd sleep with cocked guns all the time.

It's wonderful to just start somewhere and say, "Gee, I don't want to go there," and just turn around and go in some other direction. It turned out that I had friends everywhere that I went that I hadn't seen in years. So I would call them. I would be outside of town. I wouldn't give them very much notice. I'd say, "Do you have a cup of coffee? Could I stop in?" I'd make sure I wasn't followed, and park a distance away and then go in and talk to them, tell them the story. Everyone said, "Stay with us a while." So I would maybe stay a day or two and then move on. Sometimes longer than that. Other times I'd just stop at a state park and camp out, just be with nature. But I did an awful lot of driving, and I loved to drive. A lot of it was repeat, back and forth, in the same area. I had a CB, so I could listen to the truckers, and they were very helpful. You could always get information and know what the conditions were.

The one thing that I did, though, if anyone got a phone call, when I might have been staying with a friend or something like that, and it was a hang-up, or anyone asking for me—man, I was on the road as soon as I could pack the truck. That happened to me twice. Once down in Florida. In fact, I doubled back and forth across Florida getting out of there. Again, I found out even under the tension of always

having one eye in the rear-view mirror and taking precautions, and always crossing the street with a group of people, just taking all the precautions that you did, that I loved being on the road. It was exciting to see America and see all the places I went to. In fact, I could have stayed on the road another year. Maybe that's what I'll do.

Despite the tension, everyone was wonderful. The people were nice. Someone would see the license plates and say, "What are you doing?" I'd say, "Well, I'm off writing a book, and I just was passing through." I'd stop in these little dives. But I really didn't have very much money, so I had to husband what I had. That's why I stopped in and saw a lot of friends. They would feed me. I had enough clothing and underclothes and things like that to last ten days to two weeks, before I had to get it washed. I'd stop more frequently than that, but I could have lasted a good two weeks without having to feel dirty.

But I really enjoyed seeing America, and there are some places I didn't get to that I wanted to go to. Then I'd be called back because they thought the trials were going to start, and then I'd go back out to Los Angeles. Only one day against the main group, I guess I was the only witness the government called. They ended up all pleading guilty, including Mondavano, who was the con man who caused the problem in the first place, and his son and wife. They all ended up pleading guilty. But I had to wait a whole month. The FBI put me up, at least they put me up in a decent place, the Marina Del Rey, under an assumed name, a nice hotel. But the government doesn't pay you very much. In fact, it's not pay, it's sort of a witness fee. I think the room at a government rate went for about ninety dollars, and I think you got eighty-three, so you were in the hole before you even started. I had no government subsidy that time I was on the road. It was all help from this one individual and occasionally from my family. Certainly a lot of my friends helped me as I moved around, but I really, truly enjoyed the run. So they could have chased me a long time.

They always say, "If they really wanted you, they could get you." I'm not so sure they could have. Because I covered about everything. Only once or twice did I get careless. Nothing came of it, though I got scared. But it was fun.

RITCHIE: Do you have any assurance that they've stopped looking for you now?

ELSON: No. I talked to one of the agents not too long ago, within the last couple of weeks. A lot of them are out of jail already, and a couple that I was nervous about are out. For a while there we had a source, and that was mainly because I had become friendly with the wife of one of them, who I got to help the government, and she had great sources of information. I had a report that once—this was last year—that it was just a matter of when, not how. There was no doubt that he's a dead man—meaning me. So I reported that to the FBI, but I think we both figured that was probably jail talk. See, you don't know. And those guys could do that time standing on their heads, where you and I would go crazy after three days. You know, a year to twelve years is nothing for some of them, because they've spent most of their lives in places like that.

I don't know. They've indicated that they didn't think there was, but again, they can't give you any guarantees or any assurances. I'm now going on the theory that they pretty much have other things on their mind. I imagine though that if I stumbled into something I might get knocked around a little bit. I don't know whether I'd actually be terminated. What you always feared with someone like that is that some cowboy who thinks he's doing something real fancy, or who's crazy on drugs or something else, might go after you just for the hell of it, because you embarrassed them, or that sort of thing.

I've always felt fairly safe here in Washington, for the most part, because I think they're not going to do anything stupid. But then on the other hand, the way things have developed around here, you know it could easily be laid to a drug killing or an accident. So I'm just as happy that I'm leaving.

RITCHIE: Well, what kind of plans do you have for the future?

ELSON: Well, I'm going back to Arizona and I'm going to be a cowboy for a while, I guess. I really would like to put down, or use as a basis for some fiction—I'd like to do something with all these experiences. I really feel like I've had an unusual life. Lots of things I haven't told you about were unusual. I feel it's been exciting and there might be something to say. So I'd like to really get away and give it a try, because I don't think I'd forgive myself if I didn't.

Secondly, I'd still like to be around politics and try to get a new, fresh look. And the only way I know to do that is to go back, sort of be quiet for a while, and watch the local scene, and see if I can recharge the battery. I feel that maybe with the type of problems we're facing, and the experience that I've had, I might be of use to someone, or to society in general. I've not ruled that out. Then I'd like to finish my travels that I didn't on my run. You know, the United States is just such an incredible country. I hate to see what's happening to it, with the infrastructure, the way it's falling apart. When I was driving around I found that every bridge in the country had to be rebuilt, and little towns have all died, and our big cities have gone to hell. I identified a lot with [John Steinbeck's] *Travels With Charlie*, so I wouldn't mind doing some of that.

I also always wanted to do something with photography, and I would like to play around with that. And yet, I really feel the need to just get away for some quiet time. I mean, no telephones. My nerves haven't been too good in the last few years. I think the episodes, all of them put together have taken more out of me than I realized. So now I feel a real need for some form of rejuvenation. Hopefully, this will come about back in the place that I love, being isolated and away, but not so isolated that I can't get to a library or do the type of things I might want to do.

So I have mixed emotions about leaving Washington. I'm sort of sad. It's sort of hitting me now, as I drive by places that I've been and all of a sudden memories come back. And going through things and trying to sort out things and pack. I'm sort of leaving Washington as I came, pretty much broke. But I sure have had my share of excitement and fun, so I guess I shouldn't complain. I'm still half-way healthy, and I still think I have a future. I don't intend to just sit on my [expletive] and twiddle my thumbs and contemplate my navel. I want to do more than that.

I'm going to miss Washington. I think I've been in most of the major capitals in the Western world, and practically all of Central and Latin America, and I still think Washington is the most fascinating of all in its sort of funny way. So I'm going to miss it. I learned one thing when I was on the road, and when I was going through everything. As cynical as I may have sounded during these interviews about politics and government, I still love it and I can't get it out of my system. As much as I say bad things about it, I still get excited about it. Every time I get up in the morning and read the morning paper, or listen to the news, I get all involved again. I'm hoping that will

be tempered a little bit when I really don't have access to some of that. [laughs] But it's going to be tough.

RITCHIE: Well, I think it's great that you've left this record through the oral history, but I really hope you'll write a book about it all.

ELSON: Well, I'd like to try.

End of Interview #13